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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: RENOWNED MANDALAY WRITER FRAIL BUT STILL VOCAL

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Despite her age of 90, well known Mandalay author and political critic "Ludu" (People's) Daw Ahma remains outspoken, respected widely among the Burmese, and an irritant to the regime, as shown by a recent interview with the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). She points to thousands of younger writers and artists who attended her 90th birthday ceremony as evidence that a new generation of politically conscious writers may emerge. Daw Ahma is thus far the exception, rather than the norm, in testing the regime. The regime reacted with press attacks, reflecting its intolerance of free expression or opposing views. END SUMMARY

2. (SBU) In 1946, Daw Ahma and her husband founded the "Ludu" (People's) Press in Mandalay, which printed books and a popular newspaper. Government censors shut down the Ludu press in 1967 and in 1978, police jailed both Daw Ahma and her husband (now deceased) for their political writings. Daw Ahma is not closely affiliated with the NLD, though she too speaks out on the need for greater freedoms in Burma. One of her sons, now in hiding, was a member of the Burmese Communist Party (BCP), which is a political factor now only for the regime.

3. (SBU) In late April, Daw Ahma granted an interview to Norway-based Democratic Voice of Burma that the DVB later broadcast into Burma. In the interview, she called for "People's Power," public movements to break the current political stalemate, noting that repeated NLD overtures to the SPDC have yielded no response and the regime will not move unless pushed by a public uprising. "You can't despair, my children. You have to do something," she exhorted younger generations in the interview.

4. (SBU) According to NLD sources and Daw Ahma's family, the GOB responded to the DVB interview by leaving anonymous notes in front of Daw Ahma's Mandalay home that condemned her for contact with outside press and for advocating political reforms. In mid-June the GOB's media organs ran articles attacking her son for his BCP ties and alleged collaboration with foreign media organizations with the goal of "removal of the government." These articles referred to him as the "son of writer Ludu Daw Ahma."

5. (SBU) A June 22 call by Emboffs on Ludu Daw Ahma at her summer Pyin-Oo-Lwin (Maymyo) home found the elder writer in good spirits, though in frail physical condition. She noted that speaking out through DVB was not brave, but rather "reality" and that she reflected the voices of the Burmese people. She added that she feels well connected to the sufferings of people around the country through letters she receives and news from BBC, VOA, RFA and DVB. She indicated her awareness of the GOB media attacks on her and her son and disclosed that DVB and other foreign media had called her seeking a reaction to the GOB attacks. She stated that she had declined to comment publicly on these. She noted that there are many new writers following in her footsteps and pointed to the attendance at her 90th birthday commemoration in Amarapura (20 miles south of Mandalay) in November 2005 when thousands of writers and artists came from across Burma. She vowed to continue speaking out in the name of the Burmese people and their plight.

6. (SBU) One of Burma's most respected contemporary writers, Ludu Daw Ahma has over the years occasionally criticized the GOB's political "roadmaps" and called for greater public expression of political grievances. Her voice is independent of the NLD's, although lately her statements credit Aung San Suu Kyi's efforts to engage the SPDC and lend support to the NLD's objectives.

7. (SBU) COMMENT: Daw Ahma's high profile limits GOB attacks to using the press, protecting her from the harsher treatment the GOB metes out to others who voice opposition. The likelihood of arrest or other harassment keeps most Burmese quiet, although they are willing to voice criticism and discontent privately. Most writers brave enough to speak out carefully use euphemisms to deflect regime scrutiny. End Comment.

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